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ABSTRACT

To systematically test previous assumptions about grief in widows and divorcing women, 410 separated, divorced, or widowed women, between the ages of 23 and 76, with at least one child, completed the Multiple Affect Adjective Checklist, the Revised UCLA Loneliness Scale, the Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory--Form C, the Attachment Index, and the Measure of Social and Intimate Relating. Process issues and qualitative responses were explored through open-ended questionnaire items and through telephone interviews with a selected sample of 12 respondents. An analysis of the results showed that separated and divorced women scored significantly higher on the social and intimate relating scale, and that widowed women scored significantly higher on the attachment scale. Separated women were more anxious than divorced women, and widows scored between the two groups on anxiety. All three groups were equally angry. Separated and divorced women were equally depressed, and were more depressed than widowed women. All three groups were equally lonely, but they were not more lonely than normative populations. Separated and divorced women were more dissatisfied with their attachment feelings than were widowed women. The findings highlight the similarities between separated and widowed women, and the need to study separation as a phenomenon distinct from divorce. (BL)

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GRIEF IN SEPARATED, DIVORCED, AND WIDOWED WOMEN: SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES

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Numerous and inconsistent speculations have been made about the similarities and differences between bereavement and divorce (Aslin, 1976; Hafer, 1981; Kalish, 1977; Moss & Moss, 1973; Ramsay & Noorbergen, 1981; Rose & Price-Bonham, 1973; Thweatt, 1980; Weiss, 1976; Wiseman, 1975). The main theoretical link postulated between loss of a spouse through death and through divorce has been the notion of a grief process that occurs during both bereavement and divorce adjustment (Carter, 1977; DeFazio & Klenbort, 1975; Freund, 1974; Herman, 1974; Krantzler, 1973; Kressel & Deutsch, 1977; Lambert & Lambert, 1977; Levy & Joffe, 1978; Pais & White, 1979; Rawlings & Carter, 1979; Salts, 1979; Simos, 1977). Few research projects have specifically compared these two forms of marital loss (Briscoe & Smith, 1975; Kitson, Lopata, Holmes, & Meyering, 1980) or have been based on the idea that a grief process occurs during divorce (Brown, Felton, Whiteman, & Manela, 1980; Kitson, 1982; O'Connor, 1976; Wise, 1977). Similarities and differences in grieving among the divorced and bereaved had not previously been empirically investigated.

A study was designed to systematically test previous assumptions about grief in widows and divorcing women, based on the grief model (Abraham, 1924; Freud, 1917) and an extensive review of theoretical and research literature (Averill, 1968; Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1975, 1980; Brown, 1976; Chiriboga, 1979, 1982; Clayton, 1973; Engel, 1961, 1971; Goode, 1956/1965; Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1979; Hunt & Hunt, 1977; Kitson & Raschke, 1981; Lindemann, 1944; Lopata, 1973, 1979; Maddison & Walker, 1967; Marris, 1958, 1975; Parkes, 1972; Pollock, 1961; Raphael, 1975; Salzberger, 1975; Siggins, 1966; Waller, 1930/1967; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980; Weiss, 1975). Both divorce and bereavement represent major transitions in adult development due to loss of a spouse, and grief is the intense and complex emotional response to the loss. Grief work is that intrapsychic and interpersonal process by which the bereaved comes to accept the separation from the former loved one and readjusts to the environment. It requires the breaking of libidinal ties with the lost person, reinterpretation of the meaning of life without that person, and reinterpretation of one's relationships. Stages of grieving in bereavement have been delineated through a synthesis of psychoanalytic, biological, and sociological theories: 1)shock and disbelief, 2)disorganization, arousal, and protest, and 3)detachment, resolution, recovery, and reorganization. Divorce adjustment appears to entail a similar process of grieving, but this had not been systematically investigated prior to this study.

On the basis of theory, research, and anecdotal evidence, similarities were expected to occur in the sequence of grieving stages. However, differences were expected to occur in the qualitative dimensions expressed in the various stages due to differing processes resulting in the loss of spouse, as well as social attitudes toward and personal meanings of the loss for widows and divorcees.

Outcome is considered to be reflective of process, and therefore outcome measures of affects, cognition, and behavior associated with bereavement and divorce adjustment were expected to differ. It was proposed that differences in personal and social significance of the loss predispose widows and divorcees to different vulnerabilities during grieving. Specifically, it was hypothesized that divorcees would experience more unresolved anger or hostility with concomitant depression, low self-esteem, and anxiety whereas widows would experience more loneliness and isolation as a result of over-idealizing the former spouse and maintaining attachment.

Method

Subjects

Participants in this study were 410 caucasian separated, divorced, and widowed women who had not remarried. Each woman had lived with her former spouse at least two years and had at least one child. Ages ranged from 23 to 76, and the average time since the separation or death was five years.

The women were members of Parents Without Partners, other self-help groups, or friends or acquaintances of participants, There were no significant differences between the various sampling groups with regard to demographic characteristics or outcome results.

Instruments

Outcome findings were studied quantitatively using the following instruments: Multiple Affect Adjective Checklist, Revised UCLA Loneliness Scale -- Four-Item Version, Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory -- Form C, and two measures developed by the researcher -- Attachment Index (coefficient alpha .89) and Measure of Social and Intimate Relating (coefficient alpha .75). In addition, process issues and qualitative responses were explored through open-ended questionnaire items and through telephone interviews. Numerous predisposing and mediating characteristics that have been empirically related to positive and negative adjustment in divorce and widowhood were gathered through an extensive Background Information Questionnaire and considered in the data analyses.

Procedure

Questionnaire data was gathered by mail. The response rate was 22.6%. Telephone interviews were conducted with a select sample of 12 volunteer respondents in order to elicit a more detailed retrospective view of the process of resolution of marital loss. Hierarchical set multiple regression analyses and one-way analyses of variance with associated range tests were used to test the hypotheses and examine the effects of predisposing and mediating characteristics.

Results

When separated and divorced participants and widowed participants were compared for simple differences on grief outcome measures, only two of the major hypotheses were confirmed. As shown in Table 1, separated and divorced women scored significantly higher ($p \leq .01$) on the social and intimate relating scale, and widowed women scored significantly higher ($p \leq .001$) on the attachment scale. Therefore, widows remained more attached to their former spouses while separated and divorced women engaged more frequently in social and intimate relating with others. However, just as life is complex and multidimensional, so also were the results of the outcome measures of grief resolution; see Petiet (1982) for a detailed depiction of results.

Insert Table 1 about here

A one-way analysis of variance with associated range tests for each of the outcome variables was computed (see Table 2) when it became evident that mean scores were different for the separated and the divorced participants on some of the independently computed hierarchical set multiple regression analyses, even though time since the separation had been considered.

Insert Table 2 about here

Anxiety, anger, and depression are three major so-called negative affects that have been associated with grief in the literature. It was expected that separated and divorced women would have higher levels than widowed women on all three of these internal response components of loss and adaptation. The results were not this simple. Separated women were significantly more anxious than divorced women ($p \leq .02$), and widows fell between the two groups of anxiety scores for participants. All three groups were equally angry. Separated and widowed women were equally depressed and were significantly more depressed than divorced women ($p \leq .02$). The mean scores for all participants were more than one standard

deviation above the population norm for anxiety and more than two standard deviations above the population norms for anger and depression.

Widows were expected to have higher levels than separated and divorced women in loneliness and attachment; however, here again the results were not exactly as had been predicted. All three groups were equally lonely; and, surprisingly, they were not more lonely than normative populations. Widows were significantly more attached than separated women ($p \leq .00$) who, in turn, were significantly more attached than divorced women ($p \leq .00$). Separated and divorced participants were significantly more dissatisfied with their attachment feelings than were widowed participants ($p \leq .05$).

Self-esteem and social and intimate relating were measures that comprised a social interface component of loss and adaptation. It was expected that widows would be higher in level of self-esteem and lower in frequency of social and intimate relating than separated and divorced participants. All three groups had equal levels of self-esteem, a level which was more than one standard deviation above the population norm. Separated and divorced women were significantly more frequently involved in social and intimate relating than were widowed women ($p \leq .01$), as found also in the simple comparisons above.

Discussion

The majority of expected differences between divorcees and widows were not found. In fact, there were more similarities than differences in outcome findings when separated and divorced women were compared with widowed women. However, when separated women and divorced women were considered independently, the separated and widowed participants were, surprisingly, more similar to one another and different from the divorced participants. Separation and divorce, therefore, emerged as distinct phenomena that should be studied separately. Combining separated and divorced persons into one group for data analysis obscures the effect of process, which includes more than merely the passage of time.

It is interpreted that the common thread between separated and widowed women is the element of control and choice. Control and choice appear to have more impact upon outcome measures of grief resolution than does marital status, i.e. whether the loss of the spouse was caused by separation or by death. Widows have the unique experience of having no control or choice over the loss; separated women have not yet exercized their full choice in the dissolution. The interpretation regarding control and choice was supported by the finding that divorced women who felt left by their former spouses and did not choose the divorce were significantly more angry, depressed, and attached than other divorced women.

In psychotherapy, control and choice are key issues that may need to be addressed. It is important particularly for widowed and separated women to internalize the choice of letting go, so that living, and ultimately loving, in the present may be resumed.

Results of outcome measures showed high states of affective arousal and high levels of self-esteem for all three participant groups, requiring a reconceptualization of the meaning of affective arousal. Affective arousal resulting from loss is not inherently negative but can serve to stimulate an existential shift with deepened awareness and strength. These findings regarding anxiety, anger, depression, and self-esteem point to the tremendous strength of women in response to marital loss, i.e. to increased awareness of feelings, increased consciousness, a sense of mastery, and renewed self-identity. Women have the demonstrated capacity to expand and individuate, to make a difficult and painful experience growth-producing and enriching (see Petiet, 1983, for further elaboration).

It is important for the therapist to support the expression of all affect, to communicate - verbally or nonverbally - that it is acceptable to have all feelings. Affective arousal is to be expected. The grieving woman needs reassurance that she is normal, that she is not going insane. A simple explanation of the source and universality of these experiences may be helpful.

A deeper understanding of the grieving process beneficially extends throughout our work as therapists. The giving up of childhood views and wishes are processes of loss and grief. Every therapy relationship has a built-in process of loss due to the inevitability of termination. By learning to grieve effectively we help to ease the tension between isolation and relationship and make place for a more authentic human way.

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Table 1

Ranges of Scores, Means, Standard Deviations, t-test Results, and Scale Norms for the Dependent Variables for Separated and Divorced Participants and for Widowed Participants

Dependent Variable	N	Range	Mean	Standard Deviation	t	Scale Norms Mean	Scale Norms Standard Deviation
Anxiety							
Separated & Divorced	335	9-20	11.86	3.08		6.7	3.8
Widowed	69	9-20	12.07	2.95	-.53		
Hostility							
Separated & Divorced	335	12-28	14.02	2.68		6.7	3.3
Widowed	69	12-27	14.22	3.06	-.53		
Depression							
Separated & Divorced	335	20-40	23.52	4.43		11.1	5.4
Widowed	69	20-38	24.64	4.73	-1.89		
Self-Esteem							
Separated & Divorced	326	68-100	91.21	7.10		76.1	11.1
Widowed	61	72-100	90.69	7.72	.52		
Social & Intimate Relating							
Separated & Divorced	322	17-43	29.68	5.65		No Norms	
Widowed	67	13-40	27.65	6.85	2.58*		
Loneliness							
Separated & Divorced	333	4-15	8.23	1.95		8.17	1.97[a]
Widowed	66	4-14	8.17	2.05	.24		
Attachment							
Separated & Divorced	335	11-54	20.61	8.56		No Norms	
Widowed	64	12-52	31.03	10.46	-8.60**		

Note. Missing data for dependent variables not entered in calculations.

[a]Norms listed were for ages 31-40. Mean 7.51 and standard deviation 1.88 on norms for ages 41-50; mean 7.86 and standard deviation 2.32 on norms for ages 51-60.

*$p \leq .01$.

**$p \leq .001$.

Table 2

One-Way Analyses of Variance with Associated Range Tests for the Dependent Variables

Anxiety	Subset 1 Group Mean	Divorced 11.64		Widowed 12.07
$F(2,402)=4.013$, $p \leq .02$.	Subset 2 Group Mean	Widowed 12.07		Separated 12.85
Hostility	Subset 1 Group Mean	Divorced 13.98	Separated 14.20	Widowed 14.22
$F(2,402)=.314$, $p \leq .73$.				
Depression	Subset 1 Group Mean		Divorced 23.27	
$F(2,402)=4.073$, $p \leq .02$.	Subset 2 Group Mean	Separated 24.63		Widowed 24.64
Self-Esteem	Subset 1 Group Mean	Widowed 90.69	Separated 90.81	Divorced 91.29
$F(2,385)=.238$, $p \leq .79$.				
Social & Intimate Relating	Subset 1 Group Mean		Widowed 24.87	
$F(2,387)=4.490$, $p \leq .01$.	Subset 2 Group Mean	Separated 27.10		Divorced 27.26
Loneliness	Subset 1 Group Mean	Widowed 8.17	Separated 8.21	Divorced 8.24
$F(2,397)=.038$, $p \leq .96$.				
Attachment	Subset 1 Group Mean		Divorced 19.65	
$F(2,397)=48.326$, $p \leq .00$.	Subset 2 Group Mean		Separated 25.13	
	Subset 3 Group Mean		Widowed 31.03	

Note. Analyses were Duncan's Multiple Range Test.